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Transition to a Church in Mission: The Role of Adult Christian Education in the ELCIC

Jackie Nunns, MA

Introduction

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) is a small denomination of about 150,000 members, about 600 congregations, and five geographic synods which was formed in 1986 through a merger of two former Lutheran groups. It is most closely related in both theology and ecclesiology to the Evangelical Church in America (ELCA). The ELCIC is in close communion with the Anglican Church in Canada, and allows Anglican clergy to serve ELCIC congregations.

The ELCIC has its roots in the Lutheran ethnic groups who immigrated to Canada from Germany and the Scandinavian countries, where Lutheranism was the state religion. For many years, ELCIC congregations in Canada have lived out a membership model based on worship attendance, financial contribution, and participation in Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion. Since 2005, leadership in the ELCIC has been encouraging congregations to move forward from this model to one of the church “in mission for others”. This phrase has become the tag line of the ELCIC and the theme of national and synodical conventions since that time¹. People in congregations are being encouraged to reach out to their local communities, to identify and meet the needs of their neighbours. For many this vision represents a fundamental change in how they understand the mission of the church, not as the exclusive work of missionaries in far-away countries, but as the vocation of all in hands-on ministries close to home.

During the same time period, some questions facing the ELCIC, such as the blessing/marriage of homosexual couples and the ordination of homosexual leaders, have underscored differences in the use and interpretation of Scripture, biblical literacy, and the ability to reflect theologically among adults in the church. National and synodical leaders in the ELCIC have expressed concern about the biblical illiteracy and faith maturity of adults. One of the five vision priorities for the ELCIC adopted in 2008 was “Spirited Discipleship”². ELCIC National Bishop Susan Johnson wrote several columns in the *Canada Lutheran* in 2010 about the slow drift to “Christianity Lite”, and the call to return to “a deeper discipleship as expressed in our prayer life, study of scripture, generosity in giving of our money and our time, service to those in need, and sharing our faith so that others may come to know and love God”³. She has continued to emphasize her call to spiritual renewal through the provision of printed and electronic resources, by leading workshops, and in her preaching. Similar concerns in the ELCA led to the adoption in 2007 of a five-year *Book of Faith* initiative, “with the goal of raising to a new level this church's individual and collective engagement with the Bible and its teaching, yielding greater biblical fluency and a more profound appreciation of Lutheran principles and approaches for the use of Scripture”⁴.

Previous research has identified some intriguing relationships among these identified concerns of mission, biblical literacy, and spirited discipleship. For example, one of the most extensive studies of Christian Education ever undertaken, *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations*, found that for adults there was a strong positive relationship between lifetime involvement in effective Christian education and faith maturity as defined by the

researchers⁵. In preparation for the study, the Search Institute's researchers interviewed theologians and denominational leaders in five mainline denominations in the US, analyzed open-ended surveys of adults, and reviewed literature in psychology and religion in order to develop a portrait of a person with mature faith. Their eight marks of faith maturity then formed the basis for their survey questions. The marks they identified are these:

- people of mature faith trust in God's grace and believe in Jesus' humanity and divinity, and their lives are shaped by these truths;
- they experience a sense of well-being and peace that grows out of their faith;
- faith is integrated into all aspects of their lives;
- they seek to grow spiritually through study, reflection, prayer and discussion;
- in community, they support others' faith and share their faith story;
- they are committed to life-affirming values such as racial and gender equality, cultural and religious diversity, and the sanctity of creation;
- they know that faith demands advocating for social change, and understand that the church belongs in the public sphere;
- and they become personally involved in serving through acts of love and justice⁶.

For their research study, mature faith included biblical literacy, spirited and lifelong discipleship, and participation in mission. They concluded that life-long effective Christian education and faith maturity were strongly related.

Unfortunately the same study found that only 23% of adults in the ELCA were involved in Christian education of various types⁷. Ten years later a smaller random sampling of congregational attendees taken by the ELCA found that only about 19% of adults attended a bible study group at least several times a month⁸. To my knowledge there has been no study of adult participation rates in Christian education in the ELCIC.

The Research

The purpose of the qualitative and quantitative research presented in this article was to provide a profile of the opportunities that ELCIC congregations are providing for adults to grow in faith, and to explore the attitudes and opinions of rostered leaders regarding the expected outcomes, challenges, and effectiveness of adult Christian education in their contexts. The intention was to provide useful information for national and synodical leaders, as they address their stated priorities and plans for future initiatives. Leaders in the ELCIC may better understand current practice in congregations and see additional ways to support and equip rostered leaders for their work. Similarly, ELCIC seminary leaders may be helped in the design of effective education for rostered leaders by an understanding of the challenges leaders face in encouraging adult faith maturity in congregations.

In January, 2011, all rostered leaders (ordained and diaconal) who were serving in ELCIC congregations were invited to participate in an online survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Information about their current context, practices, and opinions was collected through multiple choice and open-ended questions.

Those who responded to the survey represent slightly more than 20% of the rostered leaders serving congregations, and about 22% of the parishes in the ELCIC⁹. Responses were

received from each synod in approximate proportion to the number of parishes in the synods. Over 80% of those responding took the time to answer the open-ended questions. Since participation in the survey was voluntary, the quantitative results presented here must be used with caution. Those most interested or active in adult Christian Education or those who have stronger positive or negative views may have been more likely to respond to the survey. The results are summarized and presented using eight recurring themes (below).

Opportunities to Grow in Faith

I think we offer a wide variety of opportunities for adult faith maturation. Getting people to come and see and participate is another story.

Nunns, E-survey, 2011

Every congregation offers worship, preaching and pastoral care, and these can be opportunities for adults to grow in their faith. But what other kinds of opportunities are being offered by congregations? The survey asked rostered leaders to identify other types of adult learning offered by their congregations within the last year. More than 90% of the congregations represented in the survey are offering Bible study. Other types frequently identified were service opportunities outside or within the congregation (72% and 65% of congregations respectively), women's, men's or parents' groups (43%), book studies (38%) and prayer groups (35%). Smaller numbers offer multi-congregation learning events (28%), new members' groups (26%) and retreats (23%). Ecumenical study groups and mission trips are each held by less than 10% of congregations. Other responses offered by leaders included guest speakers/lectures, DVD-based studies, the ELCIC Human Sexuality study, intergenerational events, sermon discussion groups, and movie nights.

Because participation in the survey was voluntary, no attempt could be made to determine adult education participation rates in the ELCIC, but rostered leaders were asked to identify which age groups participate. In 49% of the congregations represented, at least some young adults (aged 20 to 35 years) are participating. Some people aged 36-50 years attend events in 79% of congregations; some aged 51-65 years in 95% of congregations; and some over 65 years of age in 87% of congregations. Survey responses indicated that congregations where young adults are participating more frequently offer book studies, new members' groups, and service opportunities outside and within the congregation. These results may challenge two commonly held assumptions about who participates in opportunities for growing in faith, namely, that only older retired people participate, and that young adults do not. A more extensive quantitative research study could explore this more fully.

Faith: Process or Possession?

Adult Christian education takes a back-seat to worship and children's education (Sunday School). A shift in the culture of the congregation is required to place adult Christian education on par with worship, service and fellowship.

Nunns, E-survey, 2011

During the late 1970's the research and writings of both James Fowler and John Westerhoff emphasized the dynamic quality of faith rather than faith as absolute and unchanging¹⁰. Kenneth Stokes used a phrase suggested by James Fowler as the title of his 1989 book, *Faith is a Verb*, in which he reported the findings of the *Faith Development in the Adult Life Cycle* project sponsored by the Religious Education Association during the 1980s¹¹. Stokes notes that, while in the past, churches have put a high premium upon conformity among their people, many people of faith strongly affirm the importance of lifelong "faithing", and he describes how the dynamics of styles of faith, doubt and questioning, gender, life events, and life crises shape the life of faith. Around the same time, Maria Harris, in her landmark book, *Fashion Me a People*, described how participation in community, service, worship, proclamation, and learning by all members from birth to death shapes them as disciples, and, by their participation, the church's practice is also shaped¹². Spiritual renewal and deeper discipleship, as Bishop Johnson describes it, includes life-long reading and study of scripture, as well as prayer, worship, service, giving, and sharing faith¹³.

In the ELCIC, is faith seen as a life-long process or a possession? More than a few of the rostered leaders who responded to this survey described themselves as serving in congregational settings where there is no expectation that adults will be involved in learning. In some congregations, the understanding of faith as a "possession" or a fixed body of beliefs is commonly held by adults. Adult learning or growing in faith is just not seen as a good or necessary part of discipleship; there is no culture of adult learning. This conclusion is based on the survey responses summarized below.

When asked what hindered people from participating in adult learning, respondents expressed in various ways that some people in their congregations believe that faith should not change. One of the rostered leaders put it this way: "We are weighed down by a long-standing tradition of "the church" which discourages individual thinking and faith formation It is hard work on the individual and communal levels to try and overcome this." The authority of rostered leaders may be questioned if they suggest new ways of understanding - one leader suggested that it would be helpful if the Bishop or seminary would let people know that "we younger pastors do not make stuff up just to be radical or different". Some rostered leaders thought that adults viewed challenges to the beliefs they had learned in childhood and confirmation as harmful or threatening to their faith. Other leaders mentioned adults for whom faith is seen as "a shield against the turmoil of the world", and the church, people hope, will be "the one place where change is not sweeping".

Many respondents to the survey indicated that some adults simply see adult learning as unnecessary. This was summed up by one leader as the attitude that "I've been confirmed. Why would I need to study any more?" Leaders understand that when adults view learning as an optional part of the life of faith, participation in adult learning becomes one more demand on their time in their already over-committed schedules. Adult learning is simply not given priority. "It's not seen to be important for their lives in comparison to all the other things that are available and calling for their attention" was the way one respondent put it.

One leader, reflecting on the different expectations regarding adult learning in the congregations where s/he had served, asked "How do congregational cultures themselves encourage or discourage Christian education?" I think that this question opens up many related and difficult questions that cannot be fully explored in this article, such as, how congregational culture can be changed, and how we can create a new image of adult faith as a dynamic process where life-long learning plays an important part.

Adult Learning has a Bad Reputation

One comment I frequently hear ... is "I don't know enough about the Bible to contribute. I'd just look silly." So there is a "Catch-22" here. They say they don't have enough knowledge to get the perceived prerequisite knowledge.

Nunns, E-survey, 2011

One of the challenges facing congregational leaders in engaging adults in Christian education is to find ways to overcome the bad reputation that adult learning has in some congregations and in the minds of some people. When the survey asked what hinders people from participating in adult learning, almost half of the responses included the idea that people expect it to be boring, irrelevant or uninteresting. A third of the responses suggested that people felt that they didn't know enough to participate, and feared being embarrassed in the group by their lack of knowledge about the Bible. Other perceptions about adult learning that leaders frequently mentioned as hindrances were no expectation that the learning will be worth the time spent, previous experiences with poor leadership, lack of preparedness by leaders or irrelevant material, and the suspicion that the information presented may be radical, may challenge or disturb their faith, or may lead to conflict. A variety of social and personal concerns were also named: not knowing what to expect; lack of friends participating; poor reading ability or English skills; a dislike of others in the group; fear of being put on the spot; fear of new groups; feeling unwelcome or uninvited; and fear of conflict within the group.

Rostered leaders shared a variety of ways in which they try to overcome the bad reputation of adult learning. By offering a variety of types of events (not just bible study), some leaders hope that people will realize there is not just one correct way to learn. Others use sermons to introduce new ideas, or add learning to committee meetings. Some mentioned trying unusual venues (for example, in pubs), different media resources (for example, movies), or different delivery methods (for example, online Bible study). In one congregation, past attempts to discuss contentious issues led to so much conflict that people were left with the feeling that "deeper conversations are dangerous". By encouraging discussion on "issues that don't have anything at risk", this leader is teaching the skills of respectful conversation, so that in time, the discussions can move toward more controversial issues.

The Hard Work of Growing in Faith

It is a challenge to set aside old but cherished ideas of God, faith, the church. It can be threatening and disorienting. People may be disinclined to go through this process.

Nunns, E-survey, 2011

When the survey asked what issues people face when they are challenged to grow in faith, leaders demonstrated an insightful understanding of the difficult and sometimes painful changes that are required. Although a full exploration of the process of growing or maturing in faith is beyond the scope of this paper, there are some intriguing points of agreement between the responses to the survey reported in this article and some of the previous work done by others with respect to the nature of mature faith and the process of growing in faith¹⁴.

The most frequent issues identified by leaders in the survey were:

- a) People are faced with figuring out how to live faithfully, how to connect faith to daily life. One issue that was expressed in various ways was that people fear or resist what deeper discipleship might entail: it might make more demands on their time; they might have to change their way of living or their priorities; connecting faith to daily life requires time and commitment. Another group of responses identified that people are concerned with how others will view them: what would others think of their new way of life; family and friends may resist their changing; there is a negative view in their social milieu of the “fanatical Christian”. Many leaders know that changing patterns of behaviour, habits and ideas is difficult.
- b) People are faced with unlearning and relearning what they knew or learned about the bible, God and (Lutheran) theology, and with integrating the new learning into their faith. Respondents said that people can feel threatened, confused or betrayed when what they learned in past appears to no longer be true. One leader mentioned hearing the question, “That’s not Lutheran, is it?” Responses indicated that some adults fear losing their faith entirely while struggling to integrate new learning about the Bible and theology. One leader mentioned that some feel that “growing in faith may be an insult to the people of faith from their childhood – “growing” can be interpreted as “better””. Another understood that some were concerned that they will no longer think the same way as their family or friends. A few responses indicated that some adults are uncomfortable with the fact that their congregation seems to be changing without them, while other adults express the opposite concern, that they are changing and their congregation or the wider church is not.
- c) People are faced with making the transition from holding faith as a highly personal inward perspective to becoming part of a group with an outward focus. A number of responses identified people who hold their faith as a private matter, something they were not willing to discuss or express in a group. Other leaders highlighted the perception that being open in a group is risky and requires vulnerability. One leader indicated the need to shift from focusing on one’s own faith journey to understanding what it means to be a mission-focused congregation. The same leader identified that there is learning involved in doing theological reflection (i.e., what God is doing) as opposed to “voting/ opining for what I want/think /prefer”.
- d) People are faced with changing from accepting easy, given answers (outside authority) to a new role of exploring, embracing mystery, diversity and compromise, and “becoming comfortable with the tension”. One leader who responded put it this way: “The biggest issue people face in faith growth ... is the courage to be an active participant in the group, rather than a passive listener”. This means learning a new role with new skills. It can be hard work, and leaders described people as feeling vulnerable and threatened by this challenge. One response suggested that “it’s not just the subject matter [that is explored and questioned], but the trust/authority of the previous leaders/pastors”. To me, these responses indicate that growing in faith may involve a shift in the locus of authority. For many, the pastor, the denomination’s tradition, or what they learned as children has been authoritative. “Hearing that the church itself does not have unified ideas about issues” and being told that “the church has changed substantially from when they grew up” are examples of perceived challenges to the authority of the church mentioned by leaders. In addition, in people’s daily lives, there may be the cultural perception that any interpretation is valid, and popular media present many equally credible points of view. In contrast, fundamentalist speakers and books provide quick fixes and “right” answers. These opposing cultural voices

complicate the question of authority, and can make a stance of exploring, embracing mystery, diversity and compromise, and “becoming comfortable with the tension” difficult for many adults to achieve and maintain.

- e) People are faced with changes in their understanding of self, of who God is, and how the world works. As one respondent pointed out, changes in faith are often triggered by painful events in people’s lives. Life issues, aging, and grief can raise doubts. Assumptions are shaken. Growing in faith can mean facing changes in how we make sense of who we are, who God is and how the world works. For example, when one’s neighbours are people of other faiths, one respondent identified the struggle with passages of scripture that appear to condemn people of other religions.

The survey also asked rostered leaders to describe how they try to address the issues people face. Some leaders described creating a congregational atmosphere that encouraged people to ask questions. Others used pastoral care, conversation, and listening. Another way of addressing these concerns that was frequently mentioned was to normalize the discomfort of change by validating people’s feelings as the “normal and natural emotions and experiences” of the path of growth in faith, as one respondent phrased it. Some responses indicated that leaders use modeling, by describing their own faith as a life-long journey, sharing their personal struggles, and refraining from giving pat answers or taking the expert role. Other leaders indicated they are open about their own questions of faith, and are intentional in sharing theological reflection on issues where there is diversity of perspective. Two interesting ways which leaders used to show that diversity of understanding was welcomed were: providing a variety of learning events that ranged from traditional groups to “really wild book studies”; and engaging in ecumenical ministry/learning, because in ecumenical settings, participants did not expect to agree on everything.

Many respondents used the principles of well-designed learning to help people address the issues: creating spaces that were hospitable, inviting and safe, being sensitive to possible embarrassment, teaching respectful discussion and listening, including a variety of learning styles and media types, making connections to people’s experiences, offering a variety of topics, using good resources, teaching skills as well as content, and building community. Almost twenty responses included preaching and/or worship as a way to share information, to normalize questioning, or to ask/answer questions. Some respondents seemed at a loss how to address the issues faced by people; their answers included “not very well”; “I wish I knew”; “not sure”. Responses like “carefully” or “very slowly”, choosing less controversial topics, or using only presentation-type classes may indicate that leaders fear backlash from people not ready to change.

What Leaders Think is Important is Important

We do well at explaining theology. But people need to understand what it means to live a faithful and worthwhile life. That’s my goal for adult education in my parish.

Nunns, E-survey, 2011

How might the opinions of rostered leaders about the importance of particular outcomes of adult Christian education influence the opportunities that their congregations provide for adults to grow in faith? The recent research of Driesen, Hermans and de Jong showed that both what the leader perceived to be the expectations of their denomination and the leader’s view of the aims of Christian education will influence the leader’s choice of instructional model for adult learning¹⁵. In

Mapping Christian Education, Seymour lays out four approaches to Christian Education and indicates how the goal of each approach suggests the process of education, and the roles of teacher and learner¹⁶.

In order to explore what rostered leaders see as the important outcomes and approaches to adult learning, and how that might shape adult learning in their congregations, the survey asked rostered leaders to choose the most important outcome of adult Christian education. The survey forced them to choose one of the following outcomes:

- a) People engage in faithful action in the world, through ministries of care, justice and transformation (“transformation”);
- b) People participate more fully in the community of faith (“community”);
- c) People grow in their personal faith and relationship to God (“personal”);
- d) People learn and better understand the Christian and Lutheran tradition (“tradition”);
- e) People connect the faith tradition with the experiences of their lives (“connect faith and life”).

Overall, equal numbers of respondents chose “transformation” and “connect faith and life” (both 32%) as most important. 28% chose “personal”. Both “community” and “tradition” were chosen by only a small number of respondents (5% and 3% respectively).

The survey provided mixed results about how leaders’ opinions shaped adult learning in their contexts. Rostered leaders were asked to select the one type of event that would be most effective in encouraging the outcome they had chosen as most important. Almost all leaders who chose “personal” as the most important outcome chose Bible study or other study groups as most effective, but there were no other strong patterns. 29% of respondents did not choose one of the suggested event types; they chose, through the “other” option, to say that all event types were effective, that another type of event (e.g. worship) was most effective, or that a combination of two or more was their choice, frequently pairing service and study, or Bible study and groups that encourage spiritual practice. When the types of opportunities actually being offered by congregations were analyzed by the leader’s choice of most important outcome, the results suggested that there might be a connection. For example, where leaders chose “transformation” as most important, more than 90% of their congregations are offering service opportunities outside of the congregation (compared to 76% overall), while congregations whose leaders chose “personal” as most important are offering service opportunities less frequently than overall. It may be that leaders who place primary importance on people’s personal faith and their relationship to God do not consider service outside of the congregation as an important type of Christian education, while those who value faithful action in the world promote involvement in service opportunities in the community.

When the leaders’ choices of the most important outcome were broken out by ELCIC synod, regional differences emerged. In each synod, one “most important outcome” of adult Christian education was clearly favoured (i.e., chosen by more than 40% of respondents). In the Synod of Alberta and the Territories and in the Eastern Synod, “connect faith and life” was the favoured response; in the Saskatchewan Synod and the British Columbia Synod, “transformation”; and in Manitoba-Northern Ontario Synod, “personal”. These results suggest that there may be regional or Synodical differences in what rostered leaders think is important, or perhaps in what Synodical leadership is emphasizing.

Do Rostered Leaders Feel Equipped?

I think that we are in a rut believing that Christian education happens only at Bible study...but have a hard time thinking of other methods... I know I do.

Nunns, E-survey, 2011

The Search Institute's *Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations* found that effective adult Christian education required leaders that were mature in faith, understood adult educational theory, and were trained in adult education practice¹⁷. The *Adult Education in the ELCIC* survey included several questions designed to explore possible relationships between how well they thought their seminary education had prepared them to be adult educators, their years of experience since being rostered, and the types of opportunities for adults to mature in faith that were being offered in their current parishes.

About half of the leaders who responded to the survey felt that their seminary education had prepared them reasonably well or excellently to be adult educators; half indicated that it had prepared them minimally or not at all. Almost all of those who felt that their seminary education had prepared them well considered Bible study to be the most effective type of adult education. The choices of those who felt minimally prepared by their seminary education included a variety of most effective events. This result raises interesting questions that require further research, namely, are the seminaries mainly equipping students to lead adult Bible study, so that those who consider Bible study to be effective feel prepared and those who value other types of events feel minimally or not prepared, or are other factors at work?

Bible study was the most frequently-offered event type in congregations whose rostered leaders had ten or less years of experience, and also for those who had more than twenty years experience. The most frequently-identified event type in congregations with leaders who had eleven to twenty years experience was service opportunities outside the congregation. In addition, this last group offered book studies, retreats, and women's, men's or parenting groups more frequently than the first two. Again it should be clear that other factors may be at work here. For example, the survey identified that rostered leaders with less than 10 years experience are more likely to be serving in multiple-point parishes which might limit the leader's time for adult Christian education, and in rural or village locations where opportunities for service outside the congregation may be more limited.

Survey participants were asked what would enable them to be more effective in encouraging adult faith maturation in their current ministry context. Predictable responses included more time, more help, more money, and better facilities. About 30% of the responses included comments about or suggestions for improved resources for adult Christian education. More than 10% of the responses indicated that leaders felt the need for additional training in adult education – including characteristics of adult learners, what motivates adult to participate, how to work with non-readers and people with special needs, and opportunities to practice the techniques and processes of adult learning. This may be an important direction for continuing education for rostered leaders.

The Power of Connecting Serving and Learning

In my experience what works best is a combination of service with grounding in scripture study and prayer.

Nunns, E-survey, 2011

One method of adult Christian education that has recently been identified as very effective in encouraging adults to grow in faith is “service-learning”¹⁸. The term “service-learning” is used to describe a learning process that prepares people to serve in relationship with people in need, and then follows up with intentional reflection on the serving experience. Myers, Wolfer and Garland found that service-learning was powerfully related to mature faith, particularly when volunteers could develop relationships with those receiving services, when volunteers were able to see the impact of their serving, when orientation connecting faith to service was provided, when anticipated challenges were discussed in advance, and when conversations with leaders took place throughout the service about the meaning of volunteers’ experiences for their faith journeys¹⁹.

The *Adult Education in the ELCIC* survey asked rostered leaders about their experiences of participating in and leading service-learning events²⁰. 68% of those responding to the survey indicated that they had participated in a service-learning experience. Those who had been rostered leaders for more than 20 years were less likely to indicate that they had participated in service-learning. The congregations of leaders who indicated that they had experienced service-learning were more likely to be offering service opportunities and mission trips. In addition these leaders more often chose service experiences as the most effective type of learning event.

Rostered leaders who indicated that they had experienced an event of service-learning were asked to describe how their own faith had been impacted by the experience. The majority of those who responded (89%) indicated that the experience of service-learning had a positive impact on their own faith, with 10% of them using adjectives such as “extremely powerful”, “deep”, “life-changing” and “earth-shaking”. About 5% of those responding described negative experiences or felt that their own faith had not been impacted. About 6% had mixed experiences - some saw the potential for mishandling by those leading service-learning; others felt that service-learning had no more nor less impact on their faith than any other experience.

Although a strong majority of those who had experienced service-learning believed it had a positive impact on their own faith, less than half of them had ever led a service-learning event. Respondents who had been rostered leaders for more than 10 years were more likely to have led an event of service-learning. Those who thought that the most important outcome of adult Christian Education was “transformation” or “connect faith and life” were more likely to have led service-learning. Those who chose “personal” as the most important outcome were less likely to have led an event of service-learning.

The Myers, Wolfer and Garland study mentioned above concluded that “[t]he call is for congregations to understand the vital connection between their mission and intentional, evidence-based service-learning principles and processes”²¹. There is great potential in teaching service-learning as a process for adult learning for the ELCIC as it strives to be a church “in mission for others”.

Making Theological Reflection a Habit

Most people have not had opportunities/expectations that would lead them to “think theologically” on a regular basis. As well, most of them would feel inadequate to the task and believe it was the domain of “trained professionals”.

Nunns, E-survey, 2011

Thirty years ago, Loren Mead highlighted the need for lay people to be able to think theologically about their everyday lives²². He argued that, as people come to be challenged to take a front-line, active role in mission, they will be called to make decisions and seek God’s direction, to think theologically; memorized answers will not be enough²³. “The future church requires a new kind of training center for theology: the local church. What the seminary has been for ministry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the local congregation must be in the twenty-first.”²⁴

When rostered leaders in the ELCIC were asked if they have taught adults in their congregations to think theologically about their own lives, 80% of those who responded answered that they had. They were then asked to explain how they did that teaching. Common responses were through bible study (29%), preaching (26%), other studies (25%), one-on-one conversation (12%), and in meetings (11%). Unfortunately, very few responses actually explained *how* they taught theological reflection in these venues. About 20% mentioned using theological reflection questions to spark discussion or teaching such questions as a method to enter into reflection. One leader mentioned sharing with adults the process and the tools that s/he used for theological reflection. Some leaders seemed unclear on the difference between presenting their own theological reflection (for example, in a sermon) and teaching adults to reflect for themselves. Others mentioned the content of educational events, perhaps assuming that the content would cause reflection.

Making explicit for rostered leaders the need to teach adults to think theologically and providing them with opportunities to learn how to teach theological reflection may be an important part of fostering spirited discipleship and equipping people to be in “mission for others”.

Conclusions

Thanks to the enthusiastic response by rostered leaders to the survey, and especially to those who took the time to answer the open-ended questions, this paper was able to describe some important aspects of adult Christian education in the ELCIC. I think that the survey’s participation rate indicates that rostered leaders know that adult Christian education is important, and further that they understand that what might have worked in past is no longer working. Many of the open-ended responses indicated frustration that adults are not participating in learning and other opportunities to grow in faith.

For some adults in the ELCIC, faith is still seen as an unchanging possession acquired at Confirmation. At best, opportunities to grow in faith through adult learning are seen as optional and not given high priority in people’s busy schedules. At worst, people either expect it to be boring and irrelevant, or embarrassing and uncomfortable. Many rostered leaders are working to change this, but in my opinion, one of the biggest challenges facing the ELCIC is the need to re-image discipleship as a lifelong and dynamic process that includes serving in the world and relevant, effective learning.

Many different types of opportunities are being provided for adult Christian education in ELCIC congregations, but Bible study is still the most common. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this type of learning, since the term can be used to include a wide variety of pedagogies. Service opportunities outside the congregation and a variety of other approaches are being offered as leaders attempt to provide relevant and engaging learning for adults. But some of the more effective models of adult learning are not known or not used by rostered leaders. In particular, there may be important opportunities to help rostered leaders use the model of service-learning, and to clarify the importance and methods of teaching adults to think theologically²⁵.

The results of this survey suggest that there may still not be wide-spread support of the vision of the ELCIC “in mission for others”. Of the leaders who responded to the survey, only about one-third thought that people engaging in faithful action in the world, through ministries of care, justice and transformation, was the most important outcome of adult Christian Education. For many leaders and other adults in the ELCIC, the transition to a missional model of church will require a paradigm shift in understanding. Effective adult Christian education has an important role to play in the required shift. Rostered leaders seem to have a good sense of what people face when they are challenged to grow in faith and embrace fuller discipleship, and what hinders them from doing so. They also know how to provide pastoral care when faith is challenged. But at least some rostered leaders have identified their need for additional or different education to more effectively encourage adult faith maturation, specifically, help in understanding adult learners, and in techniques, skills and experiential modes of learning.

Endnotes:

¹ ELCIC website, Retrieved June 2012 from <http://elcic.ca/In-Convention/>.

² “Five Vision Priorities.” Retrieved April 2011 from [http://elcic.ca/About the ELCIC/documents/ELCIC-FivePillars.pdf](http://elcic.ca/About%20the%20ELCIC/documents/ELCIC-FivePillars.pdf).

³ Susan C. Johnson, “Conversion of the Heart.” *Canada Lutheran* 25 (March 2010): 34.

⁴ “Resolution Presented to the 2007 Churchwide Assembly.” Retrieved April 2011 from http://www.bookoffaith.org/bof_new/about.htm.

⁵ Search Institute, 1990 as reported in Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, *The Teaching Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁸ “Faith Practices, Faith and Worship” *U.S. Congregational Life Survey – ELCA*. Retrieved April 2011 from <http://www.elca.org/Who-We-Are/Our-Three-Expressions/Churchwide-Organization/Research-and-Evaluation/US-Congregational-Life-Survey.aspx>.

⁹ These estimates were prepared by the author based on statistics published by the ELCIC and synods, and from the author’s personal knowledge of the parishes. Parishes in the ELCIC can include one or more congregations.

¹⁰ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981) and John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury, 1976).

¹¹ Kenneth Stokes, *Faith is a Verb* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third, 1989).

¹² Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox).

¹³ “Call to Spiritual Renewal” Retrieved June 2012 from <http://elcic.ca/csr/default.cfm>.

¹⁴ For instance, the Search Institute's marks of faith maturity mentioned above include faith integrated into all aspects of life, ongoing spiritual growth through study, reflection and discussion, sharing of faith in community, and personal serving. These same ideas are identified by the respondents to the survey. In addition, James Fowler describes the process of growing in faith as sometimes requiring a reclaiming and reworking of one's past, and he described this work as "often protracted, painful, dislocating and/or abortive" in Fowler, *Stages*, 274. The aspects of faith that may change as people grow in faith include, among others, the locus of authority, and the understanding of the way the world works (*Stages*, p.244-245). Respondents to the survey also mention the painfulness, external authority and a new way of understanding the world.

¹⁵ Isolde Driesen, Chris Hermans and Aad de Jong, "Towards a Typology of General Aims of Christian Adult Education" *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 18(2) (2005), 235-263; Driesen., "Instructional Models of Christian Adult Education in a Pluralistic Society" *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 10(2) (2007), 275-297. In their 2005 study involving Christian adult educators within the Catholic Church in the Netherlands, the authors found that those leaders who accepted hierarchical decision-making and who rejected openness to the surrounding culture were likely to agree with the aim of conformity to the church's doctrines. For other leaders, tension could be expected between their aims of integrating participants' experience and renewal of the tradition, and the institutional context of the church in which they were active. In their 2007 study of instructional models, the same authors found that the choice of instructional model for adult Christian education was also related to the hierarchical or democratic ecclesiology of the institutional context.

¹⁶ Jack L. Seymour, ed. *Mapping Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 21.

¹⁷ Rohlkepartain, *The Teaching Church*, 100. Yet the study found that only 44% of churches had teachers of adults who adequately know educational theory and practice (*ibid.*, 102). In addition only 28% of the pastors surveyed took four or more seminary classes in education, and only 40% had taken related continuing education in the last three years (*ibid.*, 112). As a comparison, both ELCIC seminaries require only one course in Christian Education in the M.Div program.

¹⁸ Dennis R. Myers, Terry A. Wolfer, and Diana R. Garland, "Congregational Service-Learning Characteristics and Volunteer Faith Development" *Religious Education*, 103(3) (2008), 369-386. Much of the literature is from other fields like education and professional training. But one important study that links service-learning to faith is by Myers, Wolfer and Garland, who surveyed adults in thirty-five Protestant congregations about their experiences of service-learning, their faith maturity and faith practices.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 384.

²⁰ Seminary internships and Clinical Pastoral Education use the process of service-learning. Since both ELCIC seminaries have required both types of education for roster leaders for a number of years, leaders could be expected to be familiar with service-learning.

²¹ Myers, et al., 384-5.

²² Loren B. Mead, *The Once and Future Church* (Alban Institute, 1991), 57.

²³ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁵ Further research may help identify other useful ways of helping adults grow in faith. For example, Roberta C. Clare, "Putting Faith into Action: A Model for the North American Middle Class" *Religious Education*, 101(3) (2006), 368-389 offers a case study of transformative learning theory, Freirean pedagogy, and popular education principles; Sue Singer, "We Break This Bread: Christian Practices, Critical Reflection, and the Construction of Adult Religious Identity" *2006 Meeting Papers of Religious Education Association* (2006) (retrieved Sept 7, 2012 from http://www.religiouseducation.net/member/06_rea_papers/Singer_Sue.pdf) presents results of a qualitative study of a series of classes on hospitality built on Groome's Shared Praxis approach; Katherine Turpin, "Disrupting the Luxury of Despair: Justice and Peace Education in Contexts of Relative Privilege," *Teaching Theology and Religion*, 11(3) (2008), 141-152 and Katherine Turpin, "Learning Toward Justice: Identity-Challenging Education" *Religious Education*, 105(1) (2010), 20-24 explore the temptations for students of relative privilege as they learn about justice issues, and identifies the pedagogical

practices that emerge; Linda J. Vogel, "Helping Congregations Engage Controversial Issues in Faithful Ways" *Journal of Adult Theological Education*, 5.2 (2008), 178-182 suggests guidelines to begin claiming ministries of justice and compassion in congregations.